BRICK kilns are among the major contributors to the country's deteriorating air quality. —Courtesy The Kathmandu Post

Brick kilns blamed for worsening air quality in Nepal

NEARLY 1,200 brick kiln operators across the country are set to start seasonal firing, further exacerbating air quality, which is already worsening every day. Brick kilns began operations on Jan 15, a deadline agreed upon by the industry, government, and environmentalists.

Brick kilns are among the major contributors to the country's deteriorating air quality, including in the Kathmandu Valley. Due to delays in establishing minimum standards, many kilns use low-quality, low-cost coals that further degrade the air quality.

Officials at the federation said the Department of Industry had asked the Nepal Bureau of Standards and Metrology to set minimum coal standards a year ago, but the standards have yet to be drafted.

"As brick factory owners and their family members are also citizens of Nepal, polluted air affects their health too," said Chand. "Had the concerned agencies enforced minimum standards for coal, factories would have followed them."

Most brick kilns use coal as the primary fuel, which is imported mainly from India. Low-grade coal contains high levels of sulphur, which, when burned, can be hazardous to human health.

Air quality in the Kathmandu Valley has been deteriorating sharply, reaching very unhealthy levels in the morning. Brick factories in the valley are the third largest source of suspended particulate matter (SPM) and PM10 emissions. PM10 refers to particulate matter or solid and liquid droplets in the air that are less than 10 micrometres in diameter.

A recent study shows there are 89 brick kilns in three districts of the Valley —Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur. The valley's kilns are estimated to consume over 56,100 tons of coal and 330 tonnes of other local fuels, including sawdust and wood, every year, according to a study carried out by the Department of Environment.

The brick industry is one of the largest coal-consuming sectors in Nepal, with annual consumption estimated at 504,000 tonnes of coal and hundreds of tons of biomass. Across Nepal, there are 1,349 brick factories that produce 5.14 billion bricks a year. Nepali brick industry emits about 1.25 million tons of carbon dioxide annually, according to a study.

Experts say a number of airborne toxins and pollutants — mercury, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, particulates and various other heavy metals — generated from the burning of coal contribute to acid rain, respiratory illness, smog, and lung disease. Using high-sulphur coal results in higher sulphur dioxide emissions.

"Deteriorating air quality affects everyone's health," said Bhupendra Das, an air quality expert. "As the issue is too serious and related to everyone's health, authorities must take the issue seriously." He said that, in addition to setting minimum coal standards, authorities should make emission-monitoring mechanisms effective and encourage factories to use briquettes instead of coal.

In recent years, air pollution has emerged as the number one risk factor for death and disability in Nepal, surpassing malnutrition and tobacco use, according to a new World Bank report.—The Kathmandu Post/ANN

How Washington sells war to the world with words

By Wang Yiwei

— Courtesy China Daily

WHEN the United States attacks another country, it doesn't just send in troops or launch missiles. It starts with language. What we're seeing in Venezuela is not random messaging, but a well-designed narrative system — built around three basic steps and repeated through a set of familiar rhetorical tricks. And once you understand how this system works, you start noticing the same pattern again and again.

The first step is disguise. Change what an action is called, and you change how it is judged. So the United States did not refer to its action in Venezuela as an "invasion". In fact, it did not speak the language of war at all. Instead, it talked about "capture", "arrest" and "joint operations with law enforcement".

All of these terms are synonymous with domestic policing and not war. The effect is powerful. Once it is able to make its action look like law enforcement, questions of sovereignty or the United Nations Charter quietly fade out from the conversation.

The violence the US has unleashed is further neutralised through technical language. So, bombing becomes a "precision strike", invasion becomes an "operation" and the civilian harm it caused is downgraded to "collateral damage". Such wording does more than soften the blow, presenting war as a form of technical management — something orderly, controlled, almost bureaucratic.

At the same time, the targeted state itself is personalised. A country is reduced to a single leader; sovereignty, institutions and the population fade into the background. Once a state is thus reduced to just one individual, regime change can easily be sold as criminal justice rather than aggression.

The second step is redirection. If attention is diverted elsewhere, legality becomes irrelevant. This is why so much emphasis is placed on elite units and footage of "dramatic raids". Command rooms, night-vision images and special forces narratives dominate coverage. The audience is encouraged to admire competence and efficiency. The more impressive the operation looks, the less space there is to ask whether it should have happened at all.

Tactical success is then used to conceal strategic violence. A fast, "clean" operation is praised as restrained and responsible, although it says nothing about long-term consequences — regional instability, civilian suffering, economic collapse or endless cycles of intervention. Winning the scene replaces winning the peace.

Public debate is carefully redirected toward procedure rather than substance. Media discussions fixate on whether Congress was informed or whether the timing was appropriate. These arguments divert attention from the core issue — who authorised the US to use force across its borders in the first place.

Cause and effect are then quietly reversed. Interference came first, but the story is told backwards, as if instability demanded interference, rather than interference leading to instability. History is edited to make aggression appear inevitable. The third step is erasure. Control memory, and you control moral judgment.

Latin America is not a new story. The US has interfered there more than 40 times. But that history is wiped clean. Each action is presented as exceptional, as if it has no connection to what came before.

And before the public can fully process what happened in Venezuela, new headlines — Trump talking about occupying Greenland within two months, or news about military deployments aimed at Iran — appear. Attention shifts. Venezuela fades. Accountability never arrives.

Even imagery is carefully controlled. The public is shown pictures of Nicolas Maduro — poorly dressed, exhausted, humiliated. What is not shown is the brutal process behind those images: the killing of dozens of Cuban bodyguards who died protecting him, and the violence of the raid itself. The focus stays on spectacle, not cost.

When invasion is reframed as governance, and war becomes routine administration, the most dangerous transformation has already occurred. It doesn't happen on the battlefield. It is all in the wording.—China Daily/ANN

Bangladesh's renewed democratic chance

The road to Bangladesh's next general election, due on Feb 12, could decide far more than who governs next. It could determine whether the country restores its democratic soul or slips further into polarisation

By S. Y. Quraishi

WHEN I began researching my new book, *Democracy's Heartland: Inside the Battle for Power in South Asia*, I thought I knew the Bangladesh story — partition, language struggle, 'liberation war', military rule, the long duel between Awami League and BNP. But what I discovered in the process was more hopeful: a people who, time and again, have reclaimed democracy from those who tried to close it off.

Bangladesh's democratic instinct runs deep. The 1952 language movement, when students gave their lives defending Bangla, turned a linguistic demand into a national awakening, so much so that the world now marks Feb 21 as the International Mother Language Day.

The 1971 'Liberation War', triggered by the denial of an electoral mandate, produced a constitution that spoke the language of secularism, social justice, and people's sovereignty. For a moment, the world saw a poor, war-torn, Muslim-majority nation proving that democracy and faith could coexist.

The decades that followed were uneven — coups, military rule, and political revenge scarred the system. Yet each time it seemed sealed shut, people forced it open again: against Ershad in 1990, during the caretaker crisis of 2007-08, and most recently in 2024, when students and young job-seekers poured into the streets demanding fairness and dignity.

From an election manager's perspective, Bangladesh has been both a warning and an inspiration. Few countries have experimented so boldly with electoral design. The caretaker government system, introduced in the 1990s, was an ingenious attempt to ensure credible polls when parties distrusted each other. It worked for a while. The 1991, 1996, and 2001 elections are still cited as the fairest in memory. But the very need for such a mechanism was also a warning that when politics becomes a zero-sum war, no legal framework can compensate for the absence of mutual trust.

Once that system was scrapped in 2011, old mistrust resurfaced. The 2014, 2018, and 2024 polls were widely criticised as one-sided. By mid-2024, public frustration had reached a boiling point. The year's student protests were not just about job quotas; they were about the belief that the system had stopped listening. When the army refused to fire on demonstrators and the Hasina government fell, the spirit of 1952 and 1971 seemed to return.

The interim administration led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus has by now opened a small but crucial window. It cannot solve everything, but it can help rebuild faith. For that, the basics must come first. Elections must be credible — whether through the renewed caretaker model, a stronger Election Commission, or a hybrid approach that all parties sign on to. The state machinery — police, bureaucracy, and lower judiciary — must be freed from partisan control. Civic space must reopen: journalists, NGOs, and student unions should be able to operate without fear. And Bangladesh must protect its minorities; how it treats them will show whether it still honours its founding promise of inclusion.

Bangladesh's economic story has been extraordinary. From famine to food security, from "basket case" to global garment hub, it is now the world's second-largest garment exporter and a regional leader in female employment and social progress. But "development first, democracy later" is a risky bargain. Authoritarian efficiency works until, suddenly, it does not. Growth without accountability creates brittle success.

What makes Bangladesh remarkable is that the demand for change came from its youth. A generation raised in an era of growth and global connection is now insisting that prosperity without dignity is not enough. They are the true heirs of the language martyrs and freedom fighters; their protest is democratic renewal in action.

South Asia, as I argue in *Democracy's Heartland*, is not a democratic periphery; it is the democratic core of the world. Nearly 40 per cent of all people living in democracies are South Asian, and Bangladesh lies at the heart of that story. From the ballots that delivered 'independence' in 1970-71 to the ballots that must now restore trust in 2026, it has shown that democracy here is not imported. It is indigenous and hard-earned.

The path ahead will be difficult. The temptation to return to one-party dominance will persist; political vendettas may return. But Bangladesh has a rare advantage: it has overthrown authoritarian rulers before without descending into civil war. That memory can be its compass again.

If it can now combine economic dynamism with fair elections, stronger institutions, and an inclusive national identity, Bangladesh will not just repair its own democracy; it will also inspire a region struggling with democratic fatigue. —The Daily Star (Bangladesh)/ANN

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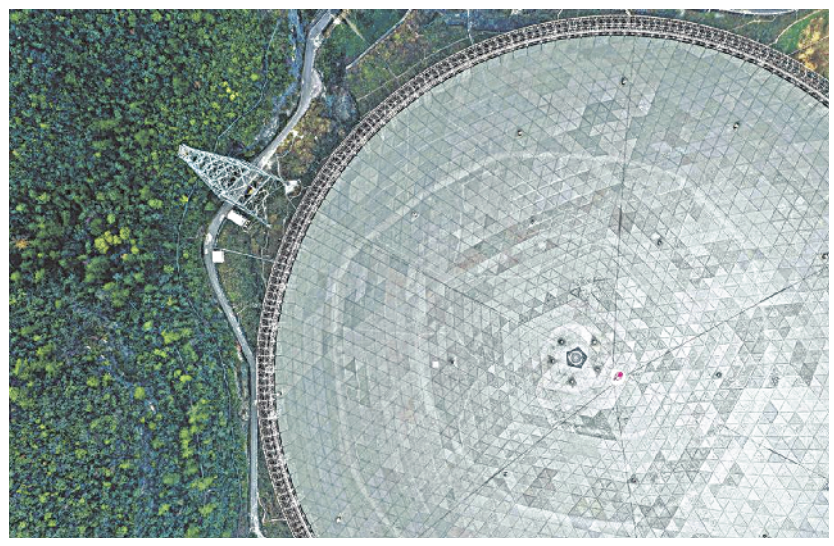
NEWSMAKERS

SAPPORO (Japan): Visitors crowd at Ganso Sapporo Ramen Street, where ramen noodle shops are lined up in a narrow alley, a popular sightseeing and entertainment spot, on Sunday.—Reuters

MADURAI (India): Participants try to control a bull during an annual bull-taming Jallikattu festival in Palamedu village.—AFP



AN aerial view of 500-metre Aperture Spherical radio Telescope (FAST) under maintenance in Guizhou province.—Courtesy China Daily

FAST reveals insights into cosmic signals

AN international research team using China's 500-metre Aperture Spherical radio Telescope, or FAST, has found some of the strongest evidence yet suggesting that at least some fast radio bursts — mysterious flashes of radio energy from deep space — are produced by compact star binaries.

The discovery, published on Friday in the journal Science, comes from in-depth observations of a repeating fast radio burst known as FRB 20220529. This marks the first time globally that scientists have captured the evolutionary process of such a burst, aiding in narrowing down the long-debated origins of these brief yet powerful cosmic signals.

Fast radio bursts, akin to super lightning in the universe, are millisecond-duration phenomena of unidentified extragalactic origin, and are extremely bright and transient but release as much energy as our sun produces in over an entire week.

Since fast radio bursts were first discovered in 2007, astronomers have detected thousands of them, yet their exact cause has remained unclear. Many scientists suspect they originate from extremely dense stellar remnants such as neutron stars, but how they generate the bursts — and whether they do so alone or with a companion — has been an ongoing mystery.

The new study, led by astronomers from the Chinese Academy of Science's Purple Mountain Observatory in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, utilized FAST — the world's largest single-dish radio telescope — to monitor FRB 20220529 for more than two years, from June 2022 to August 2024.

Wu Xuefeng, corresponding author of the study and a researcher at the Purple Mountain Observatory, said, "This is the first time we have seen such a clear 'surge and recovery' in the magnetic environment of a fast radio burst."—China Daily/ANN

BEIJING: A worker cleans snow from a pavement amid snowfall on Sunday.—AFP

MESAIEED (Qatar): Emiri Naval Forces personnel commands a tugboat from inside the wheelhouse as warships sail to Hamad Port, ahead of the 9th edition of the Doha International Maritime Defence Exhibition and Conference, on Sunday.—Reuters